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AUTHOR Yarbrough, Stephen R.
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ABSTRACT

If an instructor teaches in a rhetoric and composition program, one of the most important ways to teach discourse study as a resistance to discourse theory is by tracing the fundamental founding dichotomies of discourse theory through the history of rhetorical theory, examining how assumptions of the legitimacy of such founding dichotomies has conditioned the development of the current understanding of rhetoric. A graduate course on rhetoric and hermeneutics explores the relationships between reading and writing as they are understood in today's theory and practice. The guide used is Kathy Eden's 1997 text "Hermeneutics and the Rhetorical Tradition: Chapters in the Ancient Legacy and Its Humanist Reception." One controversy over disputed texts which Cicero cites is "the discrepancy between the writer's words and the writer's intention, routinely formulated as either 'scriptum' versus 'voluntas' or 'scriptum' versus 'sententia.'" Eden traces this assumption back to Aristotle's "Poetics." Augustine's description of the tropes as topics of interpretive invention rather than as grammatical deviations is possible because he never makes an ontological distinction between signs and things in the first place. Introducing graduate students to thinkers such as Augustine enables them to engage the history of discourse about discourse more critically. (NKA)

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Stephen R. Yarbrough
Department of English
The University of North Carolina
at Greensboro
Greensboro, NC 27412-5001

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Teaching Discourse Study to Resist General Discourse Theories

Let me begin with a definition: Discourse studies, as opposed to discourse theories, are explanations of communication that do not consider "language" or "culture" in distinction from "things" and "nature."[1] Discourse studies assume that utterances exist--as vocal noises, marks on pages, blips on screens--but that the rules and conventions of language and culture do not exist and have no effect upon the world except to the extent that people believe they exist.

Discourse theories, in contrast, assume that languages and culture are abstract entities having a different ontological status from the rest of the world, functioning by laws different from those that govern the world, yet representing or constituting objects in the world. In short, discourse theories always find themselves in the paradoxical situation of having two sorts of meaning--meaning understood as speakers' or writers' intentions to elicit certain responses, and meaning understood as signification, in the sense of what words mean in relation to a language. This paradoxical difference between what people mean and what their words mean forces discourse theories to create elaborate mechanisms to explain how these two very different notions of meaning relate to one another.

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Discourse studies are fundamentally different from discourse theories in that they do not face this paradox. Because utterances are real and are not ontologically distinct from the rest of reality, we come to understand the utterances of others through the same process we use to understand everything else--through inference. Communication with others, therefore, does not involve a first set of procedures for the sending and receiving of messages that are coded and then decoded from common conventions according to a shared set of rules, and then a second set of procedures for figuring out why those messages were sent. Instead, communicating with others involves inferring from another's responses to our actions the conditions that prompt those responses, then guessing what changes our subsequent response to their response will produce.

We make such guesses based upon our beliefs about the world, our beliefs about how discourse works, and upon our beliefs about what our listeners or readers believe about the world and how discourse works. What we believe about how discourse works therefore affects how discourse works for us, and for anyone conversing with us, because to understand others <u>means</u> to anticipate how discourse works for them. In practice, our beliefs about what others believe about how discourse works will necessarily affect how we speak and write and behave. This is one reason why general theories of discourse can never work. Once you believe in a general theory of discourse based upon observations of how you and others communicate, that belief will

change the way you discourse, thus rendering your general theory obsolete the moment it is formulated. General theories of discourse can never be valid. More important, because they presume to understand how discourse works generally even when those whose utterances they explain believe that discourse works differently, discourse theories inevitably engender misinterpretations because they can recognize no signs that fall outside their explanatory systems as falling outside their explanatory systems. Discourse theories are always linguistic imperialisms. Thus, resisting discourse theories is always an ethical, political act.

Even so, teaching students discourse theories--epistemological, linguistic, semantic, semiotic, rhetorical, and critical theories--is not an entirely useless endeavor, precisely because people have altered their beliefs about how discourse works on account of such theories, and those beliefs, in turn, have altered the way they actually engage in discourse (even if they haven't altered it in the way they think they have). Consequently, the study of discourse necessarily entails studying the history of discourse theory.

If you teach in a Rhetoric and Composition program, as I do, then one of the most important ways to teach discourse study as a resistance to discourse theory is by tracing the fundamental founding dichotomies of discourse theory through the history of rhetorical theory, examining how assumptions of the legitimacy, indeed, the apparent naturalness, of such founding dichotomies

has conditioned the development of our presentday understanding of rhetoric.

Currently, I am teaching a graduate course entitled "Contemporary Rhetoric and Hermeneutics." Our aim is to explore the relationships between reading and writing as they are understood in today's theory and practice, but in order to prepare ourselves for this exploration, we first looked at how interpretation and persuasion have been classically related, from Aristotle forward. For our guide, we used Kathy Eden's (1997) text Hermeneutics and the Rhetorical Tradition: Chapters in the Ancient Legacy and Its Humanist Reception. As Eden herself says, "this book . . . takes as its peculiar point of departure the model of reading grounded in interpretatio scripti" (5). Interpretatio scripti appears in Cicero's De inventione as the in scripto topics of juridical invention (2.40.116-2.51.154). These topics are concerned with "the controversies that can arise over disputed texts" (7). Here Cicero list five such controversies, but the number varies in the tradition from the six of the Ad herennium to the three of Cicero's later works. Of these, the one I want to focus on in my brief time today is the controversy over "the discrepancy between the writer's words and the writer's intention, routinely formulated as either scriptum versus voluntas or scriptum versus sententia" (8).

Eden traces the assumption that there can be a discrepancy between a writer's words and a writer's intention to Aristotle's Poetics, where he advises us not to fault a poet's style for

departing from the truth before first considering "not only the intrinsic quality of the actual word or deed, but also the person who says or does it, the time, the means, and the motive of the agent--whether he does it to attain to a greater good, or to avoid a greater evil" ($1461^{a}5$-8). This division within Aristotle's treatment of poetic style repeats a greater division within Aristotle's rhetoric. After Aristotle, "The arts of rhetoric . . . ," as Eden summarizes, "characterize meaning differently in their different sections: under invention as intentionality--what moral agents do or say--and under elocution as signification--what words mean" (10). Furthermore, this same division occurs repeatedly within rhetoric, and consequently within hermeneutics.

We find it, for instance, in nearly every classic discussion of the tropes. Tropes are commonly identified as deviations from standard language, but, unlike other deviations such as ambiguity, their meanings are resolved not through corrections of diction but through reference to the author's intention. We find the same division in the canon of arrangement (dispositio), where rhetorical theory has had to reconcile the disparity between arrangements of means to ends, understood by the concept of intention, and arrangements of parts to wholes, understood by the concept of signification. This reconciliation has been effected primarily through the principle of economy, by its equating the part with the means and the whole with the intention, then proposing that every discourse has a final end, or scopus, which

in rhetoric governs the selection and arrangement of parts, and which in hermeneutics governs the patterns of emphasis of interpretation--thus fixing the idea of writing as a composition, a product, and forever welding to rhetoric the aim of persuasion to an end known prior to the act of discourse itself.

Eden traces the effects of interpretatio scripti and the controversy of scriptum versus voluntas throughout the rhetorical and hermeneutical traditions, from Cicero and Quintilian, through Basil of Caesarea and Augustine of Hippo, to Erasmus, Philip Melanchthon, and finally (Matthias) Flacius (Illyricas), all along the way drawing parallels between these rhetoricians and later hermeneuticists, such as Schleiermacher, Dilthey, Gadamer, and Ricoeur. Eden could easily have extended this project, for forms of the scriptum versus voluntas dichotomy are implied in most discourse theories in the modern era, not only those of rhetoric and hermeneutics, but also those of the philosophy of language, cultural anthropology, and literary criticism, and especially those theories we have come to associate with structuralism, for Ferdinand de Saussure's division between la langue and la parole is a near replica of the division between scriptum and voluntas, and the effects of believing in each are quite similar.

For instance, Paul de Man's famous article "Semiology and Rhetoric" takes to task semioticians such as Barthe, Genette, Todorov, Greimas, and their disciples for their "use of grammatical (especially syntactical) structures conjointly with

rhetorical structures without apparent awareness of a possible discrepancy between them" (361). De Man argues that whenever readers are confronted with figures of speech (which, of course, is always), even a "perfectly clear syntactic paradigm" will engender at least two possible but incompatible meanings, "one literal and the other figural," and that although the reader will "have to decide which one of these meanings is the right one in this particular situation," the reader's "confusion can only be cleared up by the intervention of an extra-textual intention." According to de Man, "when it is impossible to decide by grammatical or other linguistic devices which of the two meanings (that can be entirely contradictory) prevails," then "rhetoric radically suspends logic and opens up vertiginous possibilities of referential aberration" (363).

Thus the distinction between scriptum and voluntas in its late twentieth-century incarnation as la langue and la parole is the source of the poststructural doctrine of semantic "undecidability," just as its predecessor was the source of disputatio in utramque partum, the "Ciceronian procedure of arguing on either side of the question" (Eden 67).

Unfortunately, de Man never considers the possibility that the split between la langue and la parole is unnecessary, just as Eden never considers the possibility that the scriptum/voluntas division may not be ubiquitous. For instance, Eden claims that Augustine maintains the classical distinction between scriptum and voluntas, preserving it in his distinction between the

literal and the scriptural. Thus she perceives in Augustine "two distinct kinds of rules: the one is broadly legal and includes the . . . spiritual interpretation; the other is broadly stylistic and covers all kinds of figurative statement. . . ." (61). This is, of course, what one would expect. However, if Augustine in fact maintains the classical distinction between voluntas and scriptum, why does he insist that readers identify the "figurative" (actually, signa translata, "transferred" signs) as false or cruel utterances rather than as a deviation from standard language? Through their own caritas, Augustine says in De doctrina christiana, readers should attribute caritas to the scriptural writer, and thus assume that he writes only what is true and good (2.17; see also Tracy 263 and Babcock 147). The apparent untruth is then read as a trope, understood as a strategy for turning apparently false statements into true statements.

Augustine's description of the tropes as topics of interpretive invention rather than as grammatical deviations is possible because Augustine never makes an ontological distinction between signs and things in the first place. For Augustine "a sign" is simply "a thing which of itself makes some other thing come to mind, besides the impression that it makes upon the senses" (2.1). To the extent that anything is understood, it is understood as a sign, because to understand a thing is to recognize its relations to other things. Understanding things is understanding signs, and vice versa. By refusing to divide res

from verba, Augustine is able to avoid dividing voluntas from scriptum, and is thus able to avoid dividing matters of proof (probatio) from matters of style (elocutio).[2]

These concepts are all linked, as Eden has argued (10), and in fact all of the major concepts of rhetoric and hermeneutics are linked to these primary divisions, divisions avoided by discourse studies--as represented by Donald Davidson's later work, and to some extent by the work of the major American pragmatists, as well as by the work of some Europeans, such as Michel Meyer. By introducing our graduate students to thinkers such as these, we provide them with an understanding of how discourse works that contrasts vividly with the tradition of rhetoric and hermeneutics based upon the division of res and verba--things and words, nature and culture. This contrast enables them to engage the history of discourse about discourse more critically and to recognize those resistances to that history--such as Augustine's--that they otherwise might never have noticed.

Notes

[1]The definition of discourse studies used in this paper is more fully articulated in my forthcoming book After Rhetoric.

[2]For a fuller examination of Augustine's resistance to theory see my forthcoming article "The Love of Invention."

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